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Embodiment and Oppression: Reflections on Haslanger, Gender, and Race

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> "As I understand them, feminist and queer theory consist not only in giving an account of the meaning of lives of women and men in all their relational and sexual diversity…Feminist and queer theories are also projects of social criticism. These are theoretical efforts to identify certain wrongful harms or injustices, locate and explain their sources in institutions, and social relations, and propose directions for institutionally oriented action to change them. The latter set of tasks requires the theorist to have an account not only of individual experience, subjectivity and identity, but also of social structures." —Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience*

In *On Female Body Experience*, Iris Marion Young argues that a central aim of feminist and queer theory is social criticism.[1] The goal is to understand oppression and how it functions: know thy enemy, so as to better resist. Much of Sally Haslanger's work shares this goal, and her newest article, "Cognition as a Social Skill," is no exception. In this essay, I will specify what I believe is special and insightful about Haslanger's theory of oppression and her most recent addition to it. However, I also explore what it is missing, namely, an account of what Young calls "individual [embodied] experience, subjectivity, and identity."[2] Echoing a chorus of critical voices, I argue that this omission undermines Haslanger's ability to effectively theorize group oppression and how to resist it. The core problem is this. Haslanger privileges a third-person methodology that prioritizes social structures over all else. I conclude by amplifying a collective call to action: any adequate theory of oppression must attend to both the lived experiences of

individuals and to social structures, that is, to the broad institutional and cultural underpinnings of oppression. A theory that does only one, or the other, will fail. Through this analysis, the chapter contributes to an overall aim of this volume, namely, to advance our understanding of racial and gender-based group oppressions by paying closer attention to facts about embodiment.

Haslanger's Project: the Big Picture and What's New

"Cognition as a Social Skill" begins with a pointed question: how does ideological oppression take root? Ideological forms of oppression are distinctive in that they are "enacted unthinkingly or even willingly by the subordinated and/or privileged."[3] The phenomenon is especially worth theorizing, on Haslanger's view, because ideological oppression is "insidious" and "far more difficult to identify and critique" than "directly coercive" and violent forms of oppression.[4] Her interest, in particular, is the way in which individuals' consciousness and agency are "colonized under conditions of injustice."[5] In previous work, Haslanger notes that humans have "psychological capacities . . . to be responsive to and learn from each other," and these capacities have a role to play in maintaining injustice.[6] This new article pushes the point further, elevating the concept of *mindshaping*

In a 2001 article, Matteo Mameli introduced the term "mindshaping." He defines it as follows: "A mind-shaping effect is an effect on the development or structure of a mind. My telling you that I've broken your computer causes a mind-shaping effect in you. It makes you angry. My teaching a child how to tie his shoelaces causes a mind-shaping effect on him. It makes him able to tie his shoelaces."[7] According to this definition, almost any effect you have on someone else is an instance of the phenomenon. If I teach you a fact or a new skill, that's mindshaping. If I make you angry, happy, or sad, that's also mindshaping.

What Haslanger means by the term is more specific. Mindshaping is a handle for a revisionary theory of and approach to human cognition, advocated by philosophers like Victoria McGeer and Tadeusz Wiesław Zawidski. It is also a label for a phenomenon central to their theories. McGeer and Zawidski's theories are revisionary for the following reason: they reject standard assumptions about human cognition. According to standard views, cognition is conceptualized as "an individually realized epistemic capacity,"[8] and cognitive activity is understood on a scientific model. Babies are likened to tiny scientists in cribs, learning by way of hypothesis testing.[9] Similarly, adult mental life is described as proceeding in mainly predictive and explanatory modes. In contrast, advocates of mindshaping characterize human cognition as inherently social, and they emphasize the ways in which group interests and norms shape individuals' minds.

Had Haslanger exclusively discussed mindshaping in her article, it would still be worth reading. The mindshaping literature is fascinating, and it has yet to receive wide uptake, even among researchers who ought to be sympathetic to it.

Phenomenologists and theorists of mindshaping are potential allies, for example. Both groups have been avid critics of the view that humans' primary mode of cognition involves explanation and prediction. In *How the Body Shapes The Mind*, phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher calls attention to "our pragmatic way of 'being in the world'" and argues that, "phenomenology tells us that explanation and prediction are relatively rare modes of understanding others, and that something like evaluative understanding about what someone means or about how I should respond in any particular situation best characterize most of our interactions."[10] Additionally, phenomenologists have emphasized the value-laden, normative nature of perception and cognition, something that advocates of mindshaping also emphasize.

For example, in *Visible Identities*, Linda Martín Alcoff argues, "Racism is manifest at the level of perception itself."[11] Her point is not just that racist predictions and explanations affect what we see and do not see. Rather, she suggests that perception involves epistemic practices and bodily habits, which embody a kind of *racial etiquette.*[12]

Consider an example discussed by Frantz Fanon. It's mid-twentieth century France, and a Black man is travelling by train. He is not sure where the dining car is, so he asks someone. The person is white. "Excuse me," he says, "could you please tell me where the restaurant car is?"[13] The white passenger, only half paying attention, responds in pidgin: "Yes sonny boy, you go corridor, you go straight, go one car, go two car, go three car, you there."[14] What has just happened? One possibility is that the white passenger heard every word spoken by the Black speaker perfectly but responded in pidgin in order to keep the man "in his place." A second possibility—and the one that interests me most in this context—is that the white passenger was failing to pay full attention. He engaged in the bodily activity of judging someone quickly and mindlessly instead of stopping for a minute, listening to what a stranger has said, and responding based on the actual facts.[15] As a matter of fact, the Black stranger in front of him speaks fluent French. Fanon hints that there is a pattern here. Across France, he and a team of researchers observed white Europeans behaving in epistemically negligent ways when interacting with Black individuals. The pattern suggests a norm was at work: a racialized norm. For white Europeans in twentieth century France, the norm was to expend minimal epistemic effort when interacting with Black folks in typical social contexts. Black folks were simply "of a type," and relying on racial generalizations was usually sufficient. The norm has consequences for the content of perception, for example, what white people hear or do not hear, see or do not see in the context of interracial social interactions. It also reveals that both the content of perception, and the

behaviors that enable perception, are shaped by social roles. A racial hierarchy—supported by an ideology of Black inferiority and "otherness"—stands clearly in the background.

Fanon's example underscores a more general point. By emphasizing the impact of culture on perception and cognition, theorists call attention to the fact that humans are trained to see, think, and act in different ways. This differential training is tied to social roles, along with the stereotypes, scripts, and norms associated with them. The norm-guided nature of cognition guarantees that ideology and group hierarchy will shape people's perceptual and cognitive experiences.[16]

Given these convergences, mindshaping as discussed by Haslanger will be interesting to a range of antiracist and feminist theorists, including those with methodologies quite different than hers. Advocates of mindshaping provide a new kind of argument for claims that feminist and antiracist philosophers have traditionally wanted to defend. Mindshaping arguments are new because they are rooted in claims about the evolutionary development of humans.[17]

Nevertheless, before feminists and antiracists—or anyone else—can decide whether the mindshaping literature is ultimately useful, more information is required. While the approach sounds plausible enough, its details get controversial fast. According to Zawidzki, every instance of mindshaping has two components: "it aims at something, that is shaping minds," and "it requires representing that which it aims to accomplish, that is, shaping minds in a specific way."[18] Yet, as he notes, one must be careful. An advocate of mindshaping cannot interpret "representing" as something that requires language. Nor can one understand "aiming at" as something an agent does intentionally.

Here is why: mindshaping is supposed to be historically prior to mindreading. In other words, when it comes to our evolutionary history, humans must have had the capacity to shape

others' minds before we had the ability to attribute beliefs or desires or emotions to others, that

is, to read minds. Moreover, mechanisms are supposed to explain why human beings have

evolved to develop sophisticated language. As a result, the representations involved in

mindshaping must be conceptualized non-linguistically. Mindshaping must be able to occur,

even if we take no view on what other people think, feel, or perceive and even if we had no

language in which to conceptualize what they might think, feel, or perceive.

The alleged priority of mindshaping raises a puzzling question. How can one shape

someone's else's mind, and "aim" to do so, without having a view about what that person thinks

or even a language in which to think? As Zawidzki notes, this is a hard question. But it must

have an answer if mindshaping is to be a viable model of cognition. Here is the key if he is right:

"The goals, functions, purposes, or aims that help constitute mindshaping are [and must be]

understood *teleofunctionally*, that is, in terms of what the mechanisms associated with

mindshaping were selected for in evolution."[19] Accordingly, he defines mindshaping as follows:

> To state the definition formally, mechanism X mindshapes target Y to match model Z in
> relevant respects R, S, T . . . if and only if (1) effecting such matches is X's "proper
> function" in Millikan's (1984) sense; (2) X is performing its proper function, that is,
> causing Y to match Z in respect to R, S, T . . . (3) Y is a mind, understood as a set of
> behavioral dispositions or the categorical basis for them; (4) X's performance of its
> proper function is guided by representations of R, S, T . . . ; and (6) Z is or is somehow
> derived from an agent other than the agent to which Y belongs.[20]

This definition says a lot, and what it communicates to me is this: "Caution!" Though

mindshaping resonates with claims that I find appealing, the required assumptions for endorsing

the model are quite heavy. People do not mindshape; mechanisms do. Some of these mechanisms

are subpersonal: they are exclusively "neural."[21] For example, Zawidzki discusses "a series of

powerful yet counterintuitive experimental results in social psychology" that suggest, "human

beings automatically, unintentionally, and unconsciously match each other's non-functional

behaviors."[22] These behaviors include "postures, mannerisms, gestures, facial expressions, and accents."[23] The finding sheds light on perceptual habits: how long we look at people, whether we look them in the eye or not, whether we look at people's lips when they are talking so we can hear them better, and so on. If humans naturally mimic one another, we may learn to be biased simply by being immersed in a culture and instinctively following the lead of others.[24] Other mechanisms are partially outside the brain and are "distributed across multiple agents, such as in pedagogy or guided imitation, where a teacher can help the target match the model."[25] In all such cases, we must say that the mechanisms "have an aim" and "a proper function." Moreover, to get the model going, we must say that the relevant neural or extra-neural mechanisms are guided by "representations" in a very specific *teleofunctional* sense. Furthermore, one must be willing to endorse an extremely controversial evolutionary story about how, when, and why these mechanisms were selected and the way in which language emerged out of mindshaping.

I am not, in principle, against endorsing controversial claims. My point is this: readers of Haslanger's article deserve to know the philosophical and empirical baggage associated with mindshaping. Since Haslanger cites Zawidzki approvingly and relies on his evolutionary story, she appears to be endorsing the above claims. As readers, we deserve to know whether she thinks that the mindshaping model (for example, as developed by other theorists like Victoria McGeer) requires such claims and why we ought to endorse them. Zawidzki is emphatic. Without an evolutionary story, there is no way to establish the priority of mindreading over mindshaping, or vice versa. "The distinction between mindreading and mindshaping," he writes, "cannot be captured in terms of simple empirical tests . . . no crucial experiment can vindicate one understanding at the expense of the other."[26] Both models of social cognition embrace the same empirical results; they just understand their significance differently.

Let me now briefly turn to a related issue. Haslanger's "Cognition as a Social Skill" is not just about mindshaping. Indeed, she is only interested in mindshaping for instrumental reasons, in particular, because it purports to explain why humans participate so naturally in oppressive patterns of thought and action. Haslanger writes, "I aim to show how social meanings shape thought and action and how this provides us with resources for thinking about ideology and ideology critique."[27] This way of putting her project takes the emphasis off of mindshaping and places it on culture. Culture, she explains elsewhere, "is a network of social meanings, tools, scripts, schemas, heuristics, principles, and the like, which we draw on in action, and which gives shape to our practices."[28] To better analyze culture's role in the colonization of consciousness, Haslanger deploys a new set of conceptual resources in her article, borrowed from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and political scientist James Scott. The novel additions to her theory bring her account of oppression into deeper conversation with a wider set of literatures in sociology, history, and political science. They also serve to supplement her existing account of the ways in which people absorb—as well as resist—oppressive views and practices.

An Aesthetic and Political Interlude

Now that I have sketched what is new and provocative in Haslanger's article, something needs to be said about my experience of reading it. Haslanger quickly introduces five new concepts—mindshaping, doxa, heterodoxy, orthodoxy, and hidden transcripts—into a theory that already boasts an impressive amount of technical terminology. The article is also peppered with intricate, hard-to-following diagrams.

Contemplating the images, my head spins—and not in a good way. Haslanger's theory is already complicated, and these new additions make it even more so. Her implicit promise to

readers is this: "Bear with me. The tools of social science can explain ideological oppression."

Yet the analysis often feels byzantine, and the payoff elusive. One cannot access what is

interesting about it simply by reading. There is too much jargon, too many moving parts.

Because of this, engaging with Haslanger's new article requires a costly investment. One must

sink weeks and weeks, if not longer, into doing the research that illuminates the significance of

the various distinctions, concepts, and arguments. Her main ideas do not jump off the page and

explain themselves. The argument's lack of accessibility and transparency were a problem for

me.

As I reflected more, I realized my reaction had feminist roots. Beautiful articles—articles

that I aspire to write and read as a feminist philosopher—are not esoteric. They are both

intellectually challenging and accessible. Accessibility is a paramount virtue, for which I am

willing to sacrifice tremendously.

When I think of these virtues, I think of theorists like Iris Marion Young and bell hooks. I

think, too, of what I call "the bell hooks rule." In her first book *ain't i a woman: black women*

and feminism, hooks writes:

> I decided early on that I wanted to create books that could be read and understood across
> different class boundaries. In those days, feminist thinkers grappled with the question of
> audience: who did we want to reach with our work? To reach a broader audience required
> the writing of work that was clear and concise, that could be read by readers who had
> never attended college or even finished high school. Imagining my mother as my ideal
> audience—the reader that I most wanted to convert to feminist thinking—I cultivated a
> way of writing that could be understood by readers from diverse class backgrounds.[29]

As hooks notes, accessibility and clarity are crucial, aesthetically and politically. This is also

writer Claudia Rankine's position. In a recent interview, Rankine talks about her first book,

Don't Let Me Be Lonely, the predecessor of *Citizen*. She says:

> One of the things that I wanted in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* was for the language to be
> transparent. I didn't want people to have to stop and think, I don't know what she means

by that. I wanted it to feel simple, accessible, conversational. As a writer, this was the challenge—How do you get the ideas of Butler or Laurent Berlant or Derrida or all the reading you've done, inside the seven sentences that say, I saw this thing and it made me sad? And how do you do it in a way that the research material is not effaced, that trace elements are still present? That seems to me always to be the challenge—to create transparency and access without losing complexity.[30]

One might complain: Rankine writes poetry, not philosophy. Yet philosophers like hooks and others celebrate these same virtues.

Why, one might ask? Note what hooks says above. One cannot "convert" a broad audience to feminist or antiracist thinking if the texts that one writes are loaded down with jargon and written in ways that alienate even sympathetic, expert readers. To whatever extent it is possible, theorists who care about social liberation, and whose work supports antiracist and feminist values, must render their work accessible, clear, and compelling. The stakes of success are high. Understanding oppression is not a mere academic matter: people's lives, wellbeing, and freedom are on the line. The issue is not just persuading individuals that there is a problem but creating the social bases for collective action and institutional change.

All of this is to say: I felt, and feel, conflicted about Haslanger's "Cognition as a Social Skill." While it is chock full of interesting concepts and insights, good feminist and antiracist theory ought to be accessible. However, this new piece drifts into obscurantism. Obscurity and complexity are not the same thing.

One might object that the subject matter requires a technical treatment and obscurity can be a virtue. An unsympathetic interlocutor might say, "Perhaps you are too simply stupid to understand, Beeghly! Or just plain lazy." Maybe, but I doubt that. I identify as a pluralist, trained in both the analytic and continental traditions. I am not against specialized terminology or theory, and I certainly am not opposed to rolling up my sleeves and digging into an unfamiliar literature. Despite all this, I found the article alienating. Its arguments felt cumbersome, the concepts

opaque. The mode of address was impersonal and, from my perspective, it sent the wrong message about who the "insiders" and "outsiders" in the discussion really are.[31]

The Problem of Embodiment

As I thought about the accessibility of her new work, it began to dawn on me that there was another, related problem. Often Haslanger uses personal experience as a touchstone for theorizing. For example, in "Race & Gender: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?," she begins her analysis by noting, "It is always awkward when someone asks me informally what I'm working on and I say that I'm trying to figure out what gender is."[32] Similarly, in "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy," she opens with a personal observation about her experience as a woman in philosophy, announcing: "There is a deep well of rage inside me. Rage about how I as an individual have been treated in philosophy; rage about how others I know have been treated; and rage about the conditions that I'm sure affect many women and minorities in philosophy, and have caused many others to leave."[33] When writing about adoption, family, and race, Haslanger also makes it clear that the subject matter is personal: she is an adoptive parent of two African American children.[34] I love these personal moments. They are powerful and announce to readers the stakes of her philosophical work. However, personal reflections are absent in "Cognition as a Social Skill."

One could argue that the omission is coincidental and that she could add a few vivid examples to make the theory more accessible. I suspect the fix is not so easy. As far as I can tell, the failure to cite personal experience—hers or anyone else's—in the essay is a symptom of her methodology.

Consider the framework Haslanger uses to explain ideological oppression—a framework that constitutes one of her philosophical accomplishments and which she has developed carefully over the last decade. Four concepts are foundational: *social practices*, which are "patterns of behavior that enable us to coordinate and distribute resources"[35]; *social structures*, or, "sets of interconnected practices"[36]; *social relations,* that is, "links between nodes in a structure"[37]; and *ideological formations*, described as "the practices, institutions, along with the thinking and acting shaped by ideology,"[38] which simultaneously justify and help constitute the system as a whole. Within this conceptual landscape, individuals are understood as "nodes" in social structures. As nodes, they are integral to the system. Yet there is no exploration of the ways in which individuals actually experience oppression in a phenomenological, embodied sense. Moreover, actual individuals (like you and me) are irrelevant to the theory; the theory is only interested in individuals qua abstract social types.[39]

Haslanger's view of gender and race fit nicely with this model. To be a woman, according to Haslanger, is to occupy a particular position in a social structure. She formulates the view as follows: "S is a woman if S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed of imagined bodily feature presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction."[40] According to this view, what makes someone a woman is not her lived experience or relationship to gender norms. What makes someone a woman is that she is subordinated in particular ways due to her perceived reproductive function. Haslanger's account of race is analogous. To be Black, for example, is to be subordinated because of one's real or imagined bodily features—such as a person's skin color or hair texture—that serve of markers of African ancestry.[41]

There are problems with accounts like this, and they are not about accessibility per se. Haslanger's analysis of oppression, like her view of gender and race, lacks an account of what Young calls "individual [embodied] experience, subjectivity, and identity."[42] The omission is not accidental. When Haslanger explains ideological oppression, she intentionally frames her explanations in terms of social structures and the processes by which they are maintained. Such processes can be described without resorting to the nitty-gritty details of any particular individual's psychology, including facts about how it feels for someone to inhabit a certain kind of body.

Many feminists and critical race theorists will object here, and rightly so. Compare Haslanger's view with Iris Marion Young's. Like Haslanger, Young offers a structural analysis of gender. "What it means to say that individual persons are gendered," Young argues, "is that we all find ourselves passively grouped according to these structural relations, in ways too impersonal to ground identity."[43] However, Young does not end her analysis there. Instead she argues that a theory of gender—defined structurally—must be supplemented with an analysis of the lived body.[44] The addition is necessary to avoid the mistake of defining what it means to be a woman simply in terms of oppression. Being a woman ought to be a feature of oneself that can be lifted up and celebrated.

Young also sinks time and effort into understanding oppression from an embodied perspective. The lived body, she writes, "is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is a body-in-situation."[45] Drawing on research in the phenomenological tradition, including the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Toril Moi, she fills out the concept of a lived body in a vivid, relatable way. "Each person," Young writes, "is a distinctive body, with specific features, capacities, and desires . . . is born in a particular place

and time, is raised in a particular family setting, and all these have specific sociocultural histories that stand in relation to the history of others in particular ways."[46] Each lived body is therefore unique. On the other hand, individuals face a range of limitations and possibilities that apply across the board to people like them. So there will be commonalities in how people live out their embodiment.

With the concept of the lived body, intentionality and agency rise to the forefront. "The most primordial intentional act," Young writes, "is the motion of the body orienting itself with respect to and moving within its surroundings."[47] We can choose to go this way or that, respond to an obstacle blocking our path in one way or another. Similarly, she argues, individuals have options in terms of how they respond to the "systems of evaluation and expectations" that shape and constrain them.[48] "The idea of a lived body," Young explains, "recognizes that a person's subjectivity is conditioned by sociocultural facts and the behavior and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen. At the same time, the theory of the lived body says that each person takes up and acts in relation to these unchosen facts in her own way."[49] The interplay of choice and constraint is constant.

To better understand this interplay and its significance, we might look to other theorists who explore agency under conditions of oppression. Consider the work of Alisa Bierria.[50] Bierria is interested in "the experience and practice of disenfranchised subjects who act intentionally *despite/against/within* conditions of oppression and violence."[51] As a case study, she considers the experience of Janice Wells, a 57 year-old Black schoolteacher from Georgia. In Spring of 2012, Wells called the police to report a suspected would-be intruder. The officer who arrived at her home demanded that she provide the name of the person whom she believed to be prowling around. When Wells refused, the officer "proceeded to threaten to take her to jail, chase,

handcuff, and pepper-spray her."[52] A second officer arrived and repeatedly tasered Wells, as she

begged him to stop. In her analysis of the case, Bierria enumerates the ways in which Wells

exercised agency throughout the encounter: calling the police to report someone on her property,

withholding information from the officer who arrived after he behaved disrespectfully, moving

to the front of her house perhaps in the hopes of making their conflict more visible, running

when he grabbed her, and pleading with the second officer to stop assaulting her. The issue is not

that Wells lacked agency, Bierria says. The problem lies in how the officers' constrained her

agency—harming her and violating her rights—and how they systematically distorted the

meaning of her actions, viewing her actions through the lens of misogynistic and racist

stereotypes. Bierria writes: "Instead of asking, how did Janice Wells' agency fail, we might ask,

what kind of agency did Wells exercise before, during, and after the assault? How was her

agency (dis)positioned with respect to institutional racism and sexism, and how might we

describe her choice-making in those conditions?"[53] To accurately describe Wells's "choice

making," her own, first-personal view of the matter is invaluable.[54] Wells is not a passive agent,

but someone who exercised a great deal of resistance when interacting with police. Bierria's

heterogeneous model of agency reveals that Wells, and people like her, routinely exercise their

agency in a variety of ways within and against oppressive social structures.

The work of María Lugones is similarly illuminating in this respect. Lugones—an

immigrant to the U.S. from Argentina and a Latina philosopher—is particularly interested in

"outsiders" like herself. Outsider existence, as she sees it, is defined by "perspectival

flexibility."[55] As an outsider, one must perceive oneself through the lens of dominant groups,

becoming fluent in their perspectives: for example, the specific ways in which they tend to

objectify you, how they stereotype or misinterpret you, and so on. However, outsiders also know

that they are seen in alternative ways in social niches where they are more at home and have

insider status. This perspectival knowledge—a kind of "double consciousness," as explored by

Du Bois—is a product of the fact that one inhabits multiple worlds at once and must travel

between worlds.[56] Famously, Lugones argues that outsider experience reveals a deep truth. All of

us—insiders and outsiders—have more than one self: the self in this world and the self in other

worlds. This multiplicity of selves makes agency possible even under conditions of oppression.

One can see oneself in ways that are not sanctioned by dominant ideologies and the groups that

create them, even in conditions where one's agency and individuality are seemingly quashed.

Lugones writes: "the oppressed know themselves in realities in which they are able to form

intentions that are not among the alternatives that are possible in the world in which they are

brutalized and oppressed."[57]

Haslanger might interject: I, too, recognize the importance of individual agency and the

way in which embodied experience reveals it! If individuals were not agents with particular

identities and experiences, there would be nothing for culture to colonize. Hidden transcripts and

heterodoxy would not be possible if humans had no choice but to conform. Moreover,

embodiment is built into my theory of oppression via Bourdieu's notion of a *habitus*. A *habitus*

consists in a set of bodily dispositions, which enable one to relate to and move through the world

in particular ways. She even says as much, writing, "Social meanings are responsive to our

embodied engagement with the world."[58]

Notice the difference, though. While Haslanger's theory of oppression presupposes the

existence of embodied experience, she does not engage with embodied experience or individual

agency on its own terms. Haslanger offers a top-down structural theory of oppression,

supplemented by a discussion of mindshaping. Mindshaping mechanisms are "exclusively

neural" or they are "socially distributed."[59] First-person experience is not central to the model. Nor does mindshaping provide any handle on how or why individuals could resist oppression and exercise their agency, for example, by creating hidden transcripts. Indeed, one of the upshots of mindshaping is that habitual actions and patterns of thought are constitutive of the social structure.[60]

The metaphor of colonization—freely invoked by Haslanger—is telling. Colonizers saw colonized peoples as passive and naïve. They sought to control them and appropriate their resources. According to Haslanger, social meanings do the same thing to you and me. Social meanings colonize our consciousness and agency via mindshaping mechanisms. Our inner resources are thus appropriated, taken over. This is precisely my point. In this picture, individual agency and embodied, first-personal experience are things that have been coopted, usurped vessels used for social-structural purposes. It is thus unclear how humans could ever retain our agency in any meaningful sense and how a critical consciousness could emerge.

One is thus entitled to press Haslanger. How and why is resistance possible, if we accept her theory of oppression? How, exactly, do historically and socially situated individuals and their agency fit into the theory's explanations of how oppression works, both in general and in specific contexts? What is the justification for bracketing first-person, embodied experience? If these questions remain unanswered, we cannot be confident that Haslanger's theory satisfies an important desideratum for a theory of oppression. Lugones put it like this: any adequate theory of oppression must be liberatory. To fulfill this desideratum, a theory cannot leave the "ontological or metaphysical possibility of liberation" unargued for, uncovered, and unexplained, as Haslanger's theory does.[61] We must know how and why freedom and agency are able to unfold in conditions of oppression. Mere lip service to the possibility is not enough. Without an

explanation of how and why agency is possible, the theory is "useless from the perspective of the oppressed person."[62]

The Problem of Embodiment: Theoretical and Practical Ramifications

The fact that I am circling back to these concerns is not surprising. They constitute a constant thread in critical appraisals of Haslanger's recent work. Gathering these critical voices together, I amplify their call to action.

Criticism 1—Pigeonholing and Disrespect

One thread of criticism goes as follows. Because Haslanger's theory ignores embodied experience, it ends up pigeonholing individuals in problematic ways. Though Young could certainly lodge this criticism, one finds it articulated forcefully by other feminists and antiracist theorists. Katharine Jenkins, for example, argues that Haslanger's account of gender is disrespectful to transgender women.[63] Diagnosing why, she points to the purely structural nature of Haslanger's view. To count as a woman, according to Haslanger, you must be perceived as having a certain kind of body, namely, one capable of fulfilling a female reproductive role. As Jenkins notes, some trans women will not be subordinated for this reason. They will be subordinated for other reasons. If so, they are not truly women, according to Haslanger. Jenkins objects: "The concept of *being classed as a woman* [in the structural sense] and *having a female gender identity*" should be given equal weight in feminist theory.[64] If feminists would give these concepts equal weight, they could craft an analysis of gender suitable for liberatory purposes. Haslanger cannot do this, Jenkins explains, because her analysis prioritizes social structures and excludes first-person, embodied experience.

A parallel criticism concerns Haslanger's account of race. According to Haslanger, to be Black is to be oppressed. However, as Janine Jones notes in her review of *Resisting Reality*, Black individuals often understand being Black as something to be valued. They do not define their existence by their oppression, but rather, view Black identity as a source of pride.[65] Consider Imani Perry, who recounts the messages that she received on social media in the aftermath of protests against George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police. These messages seemed to presuppose that "blackness is the most terrible of fates."[66] "Let me be clear," Perry says, "Racism is terrible. Blackness is not."[67] She writes:

> I cannot remember a time in my life when I wasn't earnestly happy about the fact of my blackness. When my cousins and I were small, we would crowd in front of the mirrors in my grandmother's house, admiring our shining brown faces, the puffiness of our hair.
> My elders taught me that I belonged to a tradition of resilience, of music that resonates across the globe, of spoken and written language that sings. If you've had the good fortune to experience a holiday with a large black American family, you have witnessed the masterful art of storytelling, the vitality of our laughter, and the everyday poetry of our experience.[68]

Perry also echoes the words of Zora Neale Hurston in her essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Hurston refuses to believe that she is "tragically colored" and has been given "a lowdown dirty deal" by nature.[69] She delights in her identity and heritage. "Sometimes I feel discriminated against," writes Hurston, "but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasures of my company? It's beyond me."[70] Positive views of Blackness such as these are ignored by Haslanger's structural analysis. Jones puts the problem like this: Haslanger's methodology fails to recognize "that so many ordinary Black people who theorize their lived experience are experts on race."[71]

Once more, the political significance of Haslanger's third-person methodology rises into view. To write about oppression in a way that prioritizes structural analysis, and ignores first-person experience, is to send a message. The message is that everyday people are not experts

when it comes to how oppression functions. A quite different message is conveyed when theorists recognize the value of lived experience and harness its insights in their work. By centering lived experience, they communicate to readers that individuals from historically marginalized groups have special knowledge about the harms of oppression, as well as how to resist oppression. Their experiences living in hierarchical social conditions, their emotions and their anger, constitute invaluable epistemic resources. To ignore such experiences is, arguably, to exercise a kind of disrespect.

Criticism 2—Explanation & Agency

Remember that Haslanger characterizes individuals as nodes in a structure. One could perhaps argue that this way of describing human beings is disrespectful because it characterizes individuals as interchangeable, agency-deprived cogs. However, there are explanatory worries in the vicinity as well.

Consider this one. Theresa Lopez and Bryan Chambliss argue that Haslanger's explanations of individual choice are incomplete. According to Haslanger's theory, individuals act in certain ways because of their location within historically contingent, culturally specific social structures. Yet not all individuals react to the constraints of their social position in the same ways. Two similarly situated people might have radically different relationships to social norms; they may have conflicting values and preferences, as well as divergent attitudes toward risk. If so, structural explanations cannot tell the whole story about individual choice. What we need, Lopez and Chambliss argue, are explanations of choice that appeal both to unique features of individual psychology as well as social structures. They call these "integrative explanations of choice."[72]

Critical race theorists often argue for integrative explanations as well. There is a vast, rich literature here. I mention two recent examples from sociology. First, in "Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance," Jennifer Mueller criticizes structural models of colorblindness.[73] On her view, these models ignore the fact that white individuals minimize and deny their complicity in racial injustice in inventive and ever-resourceful ways.

To illustrate the point, Mueller offers empirical evidence. While teaching a course on racial inequality and intergenerational wealth, Mueller asked students to complete an assignment about the wealth transfers in their family's history. "In terms of wealth and capital accumulation and transfer," she notes, "the full pool of papers documents over six times as many transfers of monetary assets across generations within white families than families of color. Intergenerational land, home, and business inheritances were similarly disproportionate."[74] White students also reported that their families historically benefited from state-sponsored policies designed to benefit white people as a group.[75] As part of the assignment, Mueller required students to critically analyze the ways in which their family did or did not benefit from racist policies and institutions. When evaluating their responses, she noticed a pattern. White students were consistently evasive. They tended to twist the truth, create dubious narratives that absolved their families of racial guilt, and generally deflect responsibility. They did so in unique and inventive ways.

Consider an example. One student—Carmen—"began by suggesting how 'very difficult' it was 'to tie any of the course readings' to her data because her family had no 'large ties to slavery or oppression.'"[76] At the same time, Carmen noted that her family owned slaves prior to 1864. One might have expected this student to observe that her relatives enslaved and exploited

Black labor for their own financial benefit and were, in this way, able to grow their wealth. Instead she argued that slavery was "an expendable part of my family's wealth," hence, not very important in the overall scheme of things, because one of her relatives freed his slaves at the close of the Civil War. According to family lore, these freed slaves decided to keep working for the family, even though they could have struck out on their own. As Mueller notes, this student did something interesting that was not a mere matter of habit: she combined "an old racist stereotype [of the happy, loyal slave who loves his white master] with a *uniquely reasoned* color-blind argument to neutralize an inconvenient fact and reject course premises."[77] Such maneuvers need to be recognized for what they are, says Mueller: creative, resourceful attempts to maintain white ignorance that exceed generic colorblind narratives.

Second, consider Glenn Bracey and Wendy Moore's research on racial segregation in Evangelical churches.[78] Noting that structural explanations of segregation dominate the sociological literature, they argue that such explanations hide the ways in which Evangelicals in majority-white churches actively exclude potential Black congregants. Bracey—a Black man and devout Evangelical Christian—gathered the data himself. In his fieldwork, he found that spontaneous "race tests" functioned as invisible tools of segregation in white Evangelical churches. For example, at a majority-white mega church, he was introduced to a Black woman with an interracial child. Bracey's white host told him that he was a godsend. Congregants had been praying for someone who could serve as the boy's father.[79] The implication was that Bracey, because he was Black, was the answer to their prayers. At a different church, he was told that he would be a great addition to the church's choir, even after he explained that his background was in ministry and he would prefer a speaking role in church outreach.[80] To pass "utility-based" race tests such as these, Bracey and Moore argue, people of color must prove that

they are content to play the role that white people envision for them and can be trusted not to disrupt white space. To illustrate a second kind of race test, Bracey recounts arriving at the home of a congregant in a secluded, rural area for a prayer meeting. From how he was greeted, it is clear that the host had expected him to be white. She asks her husband to give Bracey a tour of their home, including their bedroom, which is chock full of Confederate memorabilia. In his field notes, Bracey writes: "They were clearly Confederate sympathizers, and they wanted me to know it. Evangelical Christian or not, I was not welcome in this home."[81] Fearful, he quickly left the property. "While we acknowledge the role that macrosocial forces play in maintaining segregation," Bracey and Moore argue, "we contend that structural relations require institutional dynamics and human actors."[82]

Though these sociologists do not engage with Haslanger's work specifically, their criticisms apply to her theory. Like Young, Bierria, and Lugones, they argue that one cannot adequately explain how oppression functions without paying close attention to embodied agents and the ways in which they exert their agency within social structures. Their distinctive contribution is to explore how individuals from dominant groups exert their agency in conditions of oppression in ways that reflect, and entrench, an unjust status quo.

Criticism 3—Embodiment & Resistance

A final thread of criticism focuses on Haslanger's account of resistance. In "The Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde writes, "The erotic cannot be felt secondhand."[83] It can only be felt first-hand, from the inside. Explaining what she means, Lorde writes: "As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. The deep participation has often been the forerunner

for joint concerted actions not possible before."[84] As Lorde observes, being together with others in an embodied way—dancing, sweating, arguing—is a source of solidarity. However, this source of solidarity is obscured if we use a methodology that focuses exclusively on structural aspects of social reality, for example, habitual patterns of behavior or thought.

Alex Madva makes a complementary point. In addressing sexism, racism, and other forms of injustice, Haslanger recommends that we focus our activist energy on structural-level reforms. Madva thus dubs her a "structural prioritizer."[85] Structural prioritizers argue that we should reform social structures, and individual-level changes will follow. For example, if we better integrate neighborhoods using public policy, racial prejudices will decrease. Echoing the other critics mentioned so far, Madva takes issue with the strategy: "I believe that it is false and misleading to claim that we should prioritize structural over individual change."[86] While reforming social structures are critically important, we need both kinds of changes to fight oppression; moreover, structural-level interventions must be accompanied by individual-level interventions in order to be maximally stable and effective.

In a similar vein, Robin Zheng criticizes Haslanger's exclusive emphasis on structural reform. "It is all very well to say that we need structural solutions rather than reformed individuals," she writes, "but it is much less obvious what kind of collective action should be taken and how."[87] According to Zheng, justifying collective action to individuals requires convincing them that they should take personal responsibility for unjust social structures. However, questions of personal responsibility are "necessarily addressed from the first- and second-personal practical perspective."[88]

Conclusion

Know thy enemy, so as to better resist. In Madva and Zheng, in Jenkins and Jones, in Lopez and Chambliss, as well as others, one hears the echo of Iris Marion Young. A purely structural theory of oppression, Young argues, cannot explain how oppression insinuates itself in the lived body, as well as the variety of ways in which individuals perpetuate and experience oppression. Nor can it explain how and why resistance is possible. To adequately explain oppression and to illuminate modes of resistance, a theory must incorporate both social structures and the lived experiences of individuals.[89]

One might object that lived experience resists theory. It is too varied and diffuse and personal. However, I would call attention to the numerous theorists of injustice who take seriously first-person, embodied experiences, while also keeping the structural in view. Think of Frantz Fanon, María Lugones, and bell hooks. Think of contemporary critical race theorists in sociology and psychology like Bracey, Moore, and Mueller.[90] The powerful work of such theorists—and many others—is a testament to the possibility, as well as the desirability, of a truly liberatory philosophy that attends to both social structures and lived experience.

Despite its new bells and whistles, "Cognition as a Social Skill" thus returns us to a basic problem. Haslanger deploys the third-person tools of social science—graphs and charts and a focus on abstract structures—to illuminate the phenomenon of ideological oppression. We even get an evolutionary story and new concepts added to the mix. Yet, as far as I can see, the resulting theory only underscores the need, more than ever, to give embodied experience its proper due. The way forward, I propose, is to pay closer attention to feminist and antiracist theorists who have lifted up lived experience as a crucial source of knowledge, while also analyzing the broad institutional and cultural underpinnings of oppression. Taking their cue, we can see how to effectively integrate these two modes of inquiry and, in so doing, better

understand the means by which individuals and groups may contribute to, or resist, social injustice.
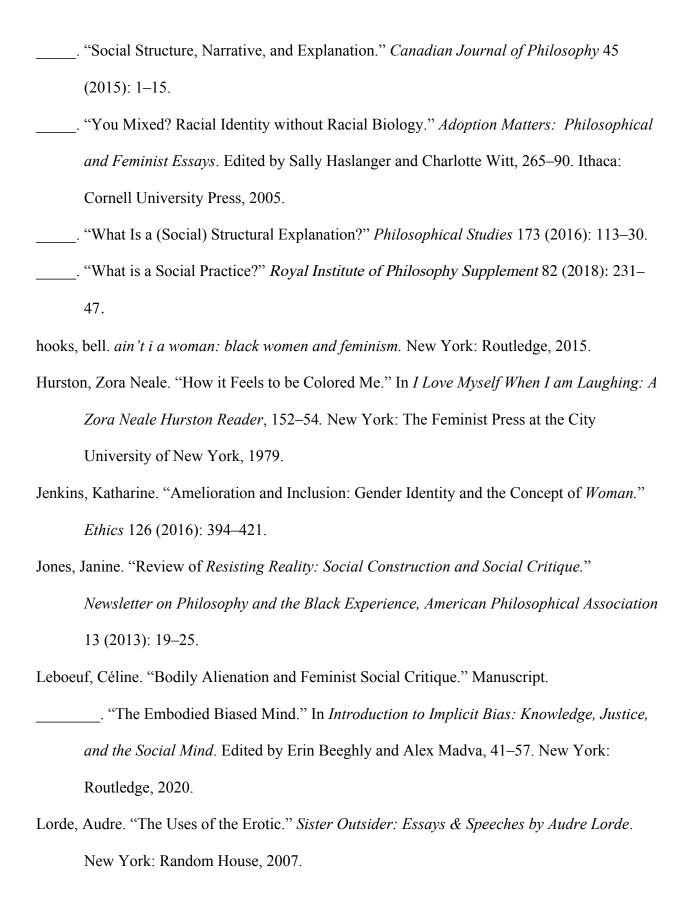
Acknowledgements

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Notes to Beeghly, "Embodiment and Oppression"
[1] Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 19-20.

[2] Ibid.„20.

[3] Haslanger, "Cognition as Social Skill," 1.

[4] Ibid., 1.

[5] Ibid., 1n2.

[6] Haslanger, "Culture and Critique," 156–57. See also Haslanger, "Racism, ideology, and Social Movements," 14.

[7] Mameli, "Mindreading, Mindshaping, and Evolution," 608.

[8] McGeer, "Mind-Making Practices," 263.

[9] See, for example, the aptly titled Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl, *The Scientist and the Crib.*

[10] Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind,* 212.

[11] Alcoff, *Visible Identities,*184.

[12] Ibid., 184–85.

[13] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18.

[14] Ibid.

[15] For various ways of interpreting what is happening, see Siegel, "Bias and Perception."

[16] For additional analysis on this point and examples, see Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes.*

[17] It is worth mentioning a related complaint here, namely, that many of the theorists just cited already discuss and document the phenomenon of mindshaping (in McGeer's sense), just not under that name. These theorists go unmentioned in the article. Indeed Haslanger talks about mindshaping as if McGeer and Zawidski invented it. However, critical race theorists have long noted the ways in which culture shapes individuals' thinking. Thanks to Janine Jones for this observation. Jones also argues elsewhere that Haslanger's work would benefit from deeper engagement with historically important antiracist thinkers such as DuBois (Jones, "Review of *Resisting Reality*," 24–25).

[18] Zawidski, *Mindshaping,* 30.

[19] Ibid., 31.

[20] Ibid., 32.

[21] Ibid., 60.

[22] Ibid., 50.

[23] Ibid., 60.

[24] Similar arguments are made by Davidson and Kelly, "Minding the Gap"; Leboeuf, "The Embodied Biased Mind," 47; Ngo, *The Habits of Racism*; Sullivan: *Revealing Whiteness*.

[25] Zawidski, *Mindshaping*, 31.

[26] Ibid., xii.

[27] Haslanger, "Cognition as Social Skill," 7.

[28] Haslanger, "Culture and Critique," 155.

[29] hooks, *ain't i a woman,* 26.

[30] Rankine, "Claudia Rankine."

[31] See Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* for more on the role of promises and modes of address in aesthetic creations. Roelofs argues that particular modes of address create and sustain certain kinds of relationships, hence can work in favor, or against, the status quo.

[32] Haslanger, "Race & Gender," 31.

[33] Haslanger, "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy," 1.

[34] Haslanger, "You Mixed?," 265–66; Haslanger, "Exploring *Race* In Life," 7.

[35] Haslanger, "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements," 3.

[36] Haslanger, "Cognition as a Social Skill," 4.

[37] Ibid., 2.

[38] Ibid., 7.

[39] Haslanger, "What Is a (Social) Structure Explanation?," 121.

[40] Haslanger, "Race & Gender," 39.

[41] Ibid., 44.

[42] Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 20.

[43] Ibid., 22.

[44] For a feminist critique of the lived body see Leboeuf, "Bodily Alienation and Feminist Social Critique."

[45] Young, *On Female Body Experience,* 16.

[46] Ibid., 18.

[47] Ibid., 35. See also Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

[48] Ibid., 17.

[49] Ibid., 18.

[50] Bierria, "Missing in Action," 135.

[51] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

[52] Ibid., 133.

[53] Ibid., 137.

[54] As documented by Cook, "2 Officers out of Jobs."

[55] Lugones, *Pilgramages/Peregrinajes,* 77.

[56] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk.*

[57] Ibid., 59.

[58] Haslanger, "Cognition as a Social Skill," 7.

[59] Zawidzki, *Mindshaping,* 62.

[60] See also Zheng, "Bias, Structure, and Injustice."

[61] Lugones, *Pilgramages/Peregrinajes,* 55.

[62] Ibid., 55.

[63] Jenkins, "Amelioration and Inclusion," 396.

[64] Ibid., 416.

[65] For a parallel criticism about gender, see Mikkola, "Ontological Commitments, Sex and Gender," 75.

[66] Perry, "Racism is Terrible. Blackness is Not."

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me", 153.

[70] Ibid., 155.

[71] Jones, "Review of *Resisting Reality*," 25.

[72] Chambliss and Lopez, Social Structures and Individual Wrongdoing," *ms.*

[73] Mueller, "Producing Colorblindness."

[74] Ibid., 224–25.

[75] Rothstein, *The Color of the Law*; Taylor, *Race for Profit.*

[76] Mueller, "Producing Colorblindness, 227.

[77] Ibid., 228.

[78] Ibid., 282.

[79] Ibid. 290.

[80] Ibid., 291.

[81] Ibid., 295.

[82] Ibid., 284.

[83] Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," 59.

[84] Ibid., 59.

[85] Madva, "A Plea for Anti-Anti Individualism," 703.

[86] Ibid., 702.

[87] Zheng, "Bias, Structure, and Injustice," 6.

[88] Ibid., 5.

[89] For further arguments, see Ayala-López and Beeghly, "Explaining Injustice."

[90] See also Obasogie, *Blinded by Sight*; Salter and Adams, "Towards a Critical Race Psychology."